

FORT FRAYNE.

By Capt. CHARLES KING, U. S. A.

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CHAPTER XVI.

June had come, a radiant June, and all at Frayne was joyous anticipation, despite the momentous fact that the Platte had overleaped its bounds and was raging like some mad mountain torrent far as the eye could see. The Platte to the west of the post were one broad, muddy lake. The grassy bench beneath the bluffs to the east was specially torn away. Part of Bunko Jim's frontier stronghold still clung to the opposite bank, but some of it was distributed in driftwood long leagues down stream. Across the river, at a point half a mile above the ruin of the ferry-house, a troop of cavalry, caught on rocks from scout, had pitched its tents and picketed its horses and was waiting for the falling of the waters to enable it to return to its station, and with that troop, the maddest man in all Wyoming, was Lieutenant Will Farrar.

Six or seven weeks previously an order had come to Frayne to send two troops to scout the western slopes of the Big Horn and keep the peace between the settlers and the Shoshones. Time was when these latter rarely ventured across the Big Horn river, partly through fear of the Sioux, who claimed sovereignty over all the lands east of the Shoshone preserves in the Wind River valley, partly through regard for the orders of their loyal old chief, Washakie, who for long, long years of his life had kept faith with the great white father, held his people in check and suffered the inevitable consequences of poverty and neglect, the policy of the Indian bureau being to lead with favors only those of its wards who defy it and deal death to the whites. Settlers seldom

encroached upon the Sioux, those gentry being abundantly able and more than willing to take care of themselves, but the Shoshones had known long years of unvarying peace and, being held in subjection by their chief, became the natural prey of the whites, who mistook subordination for subservience, as is natural to freemen Americans and as easily adopted by fellow citizens of foreign birth and who soon began to encroach on their own account, stealing Shoshone crops and cattle and promptly accusing the army officer on duty as agent of cattle stealing and all around rascality when he resisted the captured stock.

Then, while this badgered official was defending himself in court, the Shoshones had to defend themselves in the field, and that peripatetic buffer between the oppressor and the oppressed, the corporations and the cranks, the law and the lawless—the much belovéd army—was sent out as usual to receive the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune and of both parties. Finding it difficult to evade the Shoshones so long as their new agent—the army agent—remained in power, the obvious thing was to down him by misrepresentation at Washington, and if that didn't work, by deft manipulation of the local law.

Of course they didn't expect to prove him guilty of anything, but there was no law against lying, and they could compel him to come into court and prove himself innocent and leave his unearned wards at the mercy of the settler in the meantime, and so it happened that there were high jinks up the Wind river valley and along those wonderful ranges in the wild valleys of the Gray Bull, the Mayberry, the Metcalfs, north of the Owl Creek mountains, and the cavalry having long since been withdrawn from that section, that was how the detail fell on old Fort Frayne.

"You can straighten matters out in a month," said the commanding officer to Major Wayne, who had hastened back from the east to take command, and when it came to selecting the troops to go, even though it lacked less than two months to his wedding day, Will Farrar gloried in the fact that his was one of them. It is hard to conceive of a lot in which a spirited, soldierly fellow of 31 could possibly be happier than commanding a troop of cavalry on an expedition through so glorious a country. Amory's troop and Leale's were designated, and the latter captain being still in Berlin and the senior subaltern on staff duty in the east, Farrar was his own captain and troop commander and, despite the troubles of the Christmas season, long since buried so far as he was concerned, just about the happiest fellow that wore the army blue.

The expedition had proved even longer than was planned, but at last, with Wayne, with Amory and the recuperated cattle and rounded up Shoshones, went over the Owl Creek mountains to render account of his stewardship at Fort Washakie. Will was told to make the best of his way homeward with his own command, and, marching leisurely along in the radiant spring mornings through a country unmarred for wild beauty in all America, shooting, fishing, plunging in mountain streams, sleeping dreamily in the open air by night, they reached the valley of the Platte toward mid-June. The blessed landmark of the Eagle buttes came in sight one peerless morning. The blue summits of the Medicine Bow loomed up across the horizon to the southeast. The flag tipped bluffs of old Fort Frayne would greet their eyes before the close of tomorrow's march, and so they did, but with a raging torrent tearing at their base, and this was Monday and less than 48 hours of Will's wedding day.

Meanwhile there had been a partial reunion within the walls of the fort, and already a joyous band of army folk had gathered in anticipation of the June wedding, with Kitty Ormsby as the center of attraction, since she was the colonel's niece and he was to give her away, and Wayne was to be best man by order of the bride, provided he didn't get things mixed in his own inimitable way and turn up unexpectedly at some one else's affair, as he did the night of the Willott's dinner to Captain and Mrs. Billy Ray of the 4th, where, with army Loulouie, a seat was squeezed in close beside that of the wine-cane guest of the evening, and where he was charmingly welcomed and made at home despite the fact, which dwined upon him only with the champagne,

that he was due at the Amorys', where a similar function was being held in honor of the Truscots of the same regiment, then on the march from Kansas to Montana.

"You'll see it, Kitty, that ever you insisted on my having Wayne for best man," wrote poor Will, with prophetic and unwelcome protest. "Wayne said my Willy," was the positive rejoinder, and no one but Wayne would do. "All right," said Will, "if you find years later that there's been some fatal flaw in the proceedings, don't blame me."

But here, on this glad June morning, all sunshine and serenity about, all perturbation at the post, all raging river about it, it looked as though the proceedings themselves would be delayed and that instead of a military wedding in the post chapel at high noon, with everybody on grand parade, there would be no wedding at all, even though Will, like a modern Leander, swam this wild western Hellespont in search of his bride. Far away to the east the floods had swept their battering ram of logs and trees and dashed it against the bridge abutments at the railway, and, though the Farrars were safely here and had been for several days, Kitty's train, that which bore her and Jack on their westward way, had been brought up, and there was no telling when the passengers could be transferred to the waiting cars upon the latter shore. And so, believing the other in waiting at the post, bride and groom elect vied to their wedding morn to call at fate. It would have been some comfort could they have known that, though miles apart, they were at least on the same side of the stream that swept between them and the altar of their hopes.

And there was deep anxiety under the roof where once again the Farrars were installed, for the mother was possessed with the fear that Willy would be mad enough to try to swim the stream, and, though Penton had had his signmen out forbidding any such attempt, no acknowledgment had been received to the effect that the repeated message was understood. An Indian who thought he could cross at Casper rocks, several miles up stream, was swept from his pony and only saved by the strength of his horsehair bridle. A scow that was launched at the head was battered to splinters, and bottle after bottle, corked and slung long yards up into the stream, went bobbing derisively away, carrying their perilled contents with them. Arrows, with silken strings attached, dropped helplessly in the stream. Bullets, similarly tethered, snatched their frail attachments and whistled over the opposite shore and told no tale other than that of anxiety.

Every fieldglass at the post, when brought to bear, revealed Farrar at 9 o'clock of his bridal morning staid and probably swearing up and down the bank, tugging at his tiny mustache and sporting beard and possibly threatening self destruction. It was a thrilling scene.

Then, many rather pale people seemed burdened with troubles of their own. Ellis had never recovered either strength or spirits since the events of that Christmas week, and her lovely face was thin, and the bright, brave eyes of old were shadowed with a pathetic sorrow; but though this shadow had come into her life another one, much harder to bear, had been swept aside. Ever since her lover's words had revealed to Ellis that it was her own brother, to save whom Malcolm Leale had periled life and lost his sight, the girl's eyes seemed gradually to open to the utter cruelty of her treatment, the injustice of her treatment, the life that very brother had won night wrecked forever. In the long hours of her convalescence she had turned to Helen in hostility that was sweet to see, and now the love and trust between them was something unexpressed. But there was something even Helen could neither explain nor justify, and that was Jack Ormsby's conduct since her convalescence.

True, Ellis had told him in their last interview that it was an end between them; that he had forfeited trust, faith and even respect and placed a barrier between himself and her forever. She had refused him further audience, and her last words to him had been full of scorn, even of insult. But no word of anger or resentment had escaped him, and surely no man who deeply loved would harbor anger now. Subbing her heart out, the girl had thrown herself on Helen's breast just before their return to Frayne and told a part of her story until then concealed—how, in their last interview, Ormsby had gently said that he would vex her no more with his pleadings, but if a time should ever come when her eyes were opened and when she could believe him honest and worthy he would come at her call, and she had humbled herself and called, but all in vain. To Helen she had told the whole story of that humble letter and that neither by word nor sign had he acknowledged it.

But Helen saw a ray of hope. The little note had been intrusted to Wayne late Thursday night, and he had promised to deliver it early Friday morning, and all that day had Ellis waited eagerly, and nightfall came without the looked-for visit. Wayne came on Saturday to convey some conventional words of farewell from both officers, "So surprised to hear of the sudden return from California; so sorry not to have seen them, but time was very short, and," she would never hear the last of the Seventh—"Ormsby had had to attend the review at the armory Friday night, and then there was just time to rejoin Leale

and she came, and what a scene there was! And how she was hugged and kissed and named and petted and, and how she strove to tell of her tribulations and could not for the volume of welcome, exclamation and interrogation, and not until tears, losses and what ails had been whisked away to her room aloft and somebody said it was almost 11 o'clock did she find breath and opportunity to say: "Gracious heavens! And I'm to be married at noon! And not a thing done yet! Why—why—where's Willy?"

Agast they looked at one another. Was not all this to have been explained by Wayne? Hadn't Wayne told her? Told her? Told her what? All Major Wayne said to her about Willy was that he was almost frantic with impatience to meet her, but he'd—had to take his bath first. What did he mean by sending such ridiculous stuff? What were they all laughing—crying at? Isn't here? Couldn't—no? Can't he swim? Why the man she thought he was would swim Niagara rather than miss his wedding day! And then—oh, day of days—perhaps her words annihilated space and reached the ears of the maddened lover, for at the very moment came an Irish howl from the porch without. "Oh, for the love of God, stop him! Don't let him! Oh, mother of Moses, it's drownin' him is!" And then, all shrieks and terror, did most of the party scatter for the labyrinth, while

only Helen and Jack remained, while all shrieks and terror, did most of the party scatter for the labyrinth, while

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"Helen, darling—not that! Don't waste those kisses!"

caught the hand and brought it down. But when it came to the ring there was consternation. To the horror of the groom, the despair of the bride, but to the marked and tremulous emotion of Aunt Lucretia, the circle produced for the occasion by the dazed best man was an old fashioned but beautiful cluster of flashing gems. Only by a miracle did it happen that the other ring was in his possession. How the mixture occurred there was no time to tell, until later, when all were gathered, for there were two whose fortunes we have followed through three long chapters who were absent from the ceremony, who, in fact, were having one of their own, and to these two, while the band without is softly playing in front of the chapel, and in eager handrails the men are gathered to cheer the bride and groom on their reappearance, let us turn and listen.

"No, dear Mrs. Farrar," were Helen Dauntson's words as the eager guests were pouring forth to the wedding. "They are bringing him here, even now, so that he may welcome Will and Kitty on their return from the wedding he cannot see."

And no sooner was the party fairly at the chapel than there drove to the colonel's door the old colonel, and two soldiers assisted to alight and led to the doorway the soldierly form of Captain Leale, his eyes still covered by the deep green shade. It was Helen Dauntson's hand that guided him into the lately crowded parlor, and he knew the touch and thrill of with the joy of it.

"Helen!" he cried. "They tell me all was going well! What a blissful wedding! I've been so long in exile! With your voice the old home feeling I've been groping for comes to me through the dark."

"Then it is still dark with you?" she asked.

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There was a moment's pause. The band had just ceased the joyous march with which it had "trotted" the wedding party into the chapel, and then, as though in accompaniment to the ceremony just beginning and to the sweet romance already throbbing here, the exquisite strains of the "Traumerei" softly thrilled upon the fragrant air.

"Helen!" he spoke, his deep voice trembling, as did the hand that still clung to hers. "You know that for me the lights went out before ever that powder flash crossed my eyes." She strove, hardly knowing why, to release her hand. "No, dear," he went on gently. "Don't be afraid I have come back to vex you with my sorrows; but listen, they will all be here in a moment. I went away hoping to teach my heart a friendship for you that should give me the right to come again and serve you as your friend. When I found that it was almost sure that I should walk in darkness all my life, I said, 'Now at least I can accept the blessing of my friendship, even as she offered it to me.' A man maimed and set apart from his fellows can learn thankfulness for a great good, though it is not his heart's desire." And here her graceful head was bowed, and silently her tears came gushing forth. "But thus has taught me the falsity of that," he went on, firmly now. "You shall never misunderstand me. Even in the dark my pulse beat gave the lie to friendship. I loved you, I love you, and so have come to say a long goodbye. I've made my fight to be your friend and failed. At least I have been a soldier. I will not be a coward."

She could control herself no longer. Though she had freed her hands, she seemed involuntarily stretching them forth. Then, leaning upon the table for support, one hand found the glove that he had removed and laid there. He had withdrawn a pace and lifted his head as though the blighted eyes were striving to peer from under their shade for one look at the face that had gazed upon in such passionate fervor so many months before. The strains of the "Traumerei" were still thrilling softly through the open casements, and, overcome with emotion, tenderness and passion, Helen bent and laid her soft lips in fervent pressure on the senseless glove.

Then the room rang with a sudden, startling, joyous cry. The shade went whizzing into space, and the next instant Leale had sprung to her and seized her in his arms.

"Helen, darling—not that! Don't waste those kisses!" And she sank sobbing in his arms just as—grand, joyous, triumphant—the strains of the wedding march burst forth, resounding among the walls of Fort Frayne.

Rocke was the first man to come tearing in to announce the return of the wedding party and the guests, but Penton was close on his heels "on hospitable cares intent" and exploding over Wayne's performance. There was no time for a formal reception. "Proceedings" had been delayed well nigh an hour as it was and the east bound train was reported unaccountably on time. Bride and bridegroom, bridesmaids, ushers,achelors and bestmen, maids and matrons—Fort Frayne seemed surging tumultuously up the colonel's steps, surrounding and besieging poor Wayne to the verge of distraction. He held the blame on his spring overcoat, a venerable garment of the fashion of 20 years ago, but that he had so seldom worn as to cause it to seem to him ever new and available, and for this garment he darted into the adjoining quarters while the laughing guests came tripping up the steps in the wake of the bride, who, totally ignoring Helen and Leale now, who were gazing into each other's eyes in the deep bow window, rushed at her uncle with characteristic explosive abuse.

"I'll never be married at Fort Frayne again as long as I live! What on earth did Major—" But she could go no further, for the shout of laughter that greeted her sally and the exclamations which resulted from the discovery of Leale and Helen silenced her completely. And then the bride was rushed away to doll her fiery and reappear in traveling garb, and then Will was hustled to his quarters to change his full dress uniform to the conventional garb of civil life, just as Wayne came in, dazed, half demented, overcoat in one hand and a package in the other that he now dreamily held forth to Ormsby, who took it, as wonderingly opened and began slowly counting over a number of greenbacks, sole contents of the wrapper, but he dropped them as of little consequence when the bewildered major produced a moment later another—a little note from the depths of an inner pocket. They were all crowding around him now, but at sight of this missive Ellis made a spring and captured it, only just in time, and was seized in turn by Ormsby, who pleaded for possession of what was plainly addressed to him, and then came unrolled upward, for Will reappeared in uniform trousers and unfastened blouse and a towering rage. "Of all things, that could have happened to a man, think of this!" he cried. "Major Wayne, didn't you promise me—"

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